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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews the literature on ways that institutions of higher education can enhance student learning outside the classroom. It considers research on the contributions of out-of-class experiences to valued outcomes of postsecondary education and identifies nine institutional conditions which appear to foster student learning outside the classroom such as clear, coherent, and consistently expressed educational purposes and an ethos of learning that pervades all aspects of the institution. Institutions are urged to take such steps as breaking down the barriers between various institutional units and creating situations in which students examine the connections between their studies and life outside the classroom. Also addressed are the roles of governing boards and presidents, academic and student affairs administrators, faculty members, and students in fostering out-of-classroom learning. All members of the campus community are urged to view learning as continuous and contagious. (Contains five references.) (DB)

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Transcending Artificial Boundaries

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Learning and personal development during the undergraduate years occurs as a result of students engaging in both academic and non-academic activities, inside and outside the classroom (Astin, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). To enhance student learning, institutions must make classroom experiences more productive and also encourage students to devote more of their time outside the classroom to educationally purposeful activities (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt and Associates, 1991).

What Do Out-of-Class Experiences Contribute To Valued Outcomes of College?

This Report summarizes the research on the contributions of out-of-class experiences to valued outcomes of postsecondary education, including (a) cognitive complexity (e.g., critical thinking, intellectual flexibility, reflective judgment); (b) knowledge acquisition and application; (c) humanitarianism (e.g., interest in the welfare of others); (d) interpersonal and intrapersonal competence (e.g., self confidence, identity, ability to relate to others); and (e) practical competence (e.g., decision making, vocational preparation) (Kuh, 1993). In addition, out-of-class experiences linked to persistence and educational attainment also are discussed.

Students who expend more effort in a variety of activities benefit the most intellectually and in the personal development domain (Astin, 1993; Chickering and Reisser, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Some experiences, however, are more likely than others to foster desired outcomes. For example, living in an academic-theme residence is associated with gains in critical thinking, intellectual development, and aesthetic appreciation; involvement in student government has been linked to gains in student understanding and appreciation of human differences.

What Conditions Foster Student Learning Outside the Classroom?

The following institutional conditions encourage students to use their out-of-class experiences to educational advantage:

1. Clear, coherent, and consistently expressed educational purposes;
2. A guiding institutional philosophy that values talent development as a primary goal of undergraduate education;
3. Complementary institutional policies and practices congruent with students' characteristics and needs;
4. High, clear expectations for student performance;
5. Use of effective teaching approaches;
6. Systematic assessment of student performance and institutional environments, policies, and practices;
7. Ample opportunities for student involvement in meaningful out-of-class activities;
8. Human scale settings characterized by ethics of membership and care; and
9. An ethos of learning that pervades all aspects of the institution.

How Can Institutions Enhance Student Learning?

Any institution can enhance student learning by using its existing resources more effectively. The key tasks in transcending the artificial boundaries between in-class and out-of-class learning experiences are (a) to break down the barriers between various units (e.g., academic departments, administrative services, student affairs) and (b) to create situations in which students examine the connections between their studies and life outside the classroom and to apply what they are learning. Key steps are for institutions to address the importance of out-of-class experiences explicitly in the institution's mission, develop a common understanding of the desired outcomes of undergraduate education and the combination of institutional conditions and student experiences most likely to produce these outcomes, assess regularly the impact of out-of-class environments on students, and shape student cultures in ways that foster responsible behavior.

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What Can Governing Boards and Presidents Do? Governing boards positively influence student learning beyond the classroom when they support such experiences financially, base institutional policies on accurate data about the quality of students' experiences, and hire a president who values undergraduate education and understands and appreciates the contributions of life outside the classroom to institutional and student goals. The president should periodically remind stakeholders about the value of out-of-class experiences and make decisions based on accurate information about students and their learning.

What Can Academic and Student Affairs Administrators Do? Senior institutional officers help create an ethos of learning when they send consistent messages about the complementarity of in-class and out-of-class experiences, establish strong working relations with each other and communication links with the faculty, translate what the institution values into behavioral terms for student performance outside the classroom, disseminate data about students and their experiences, and ask students to think about, and apply, what they are learning in class to life outside the classroom, and vice versa.

What Can Faculty Members Do? Faculty influence out-of-class learning environments by the nature and amount of academic work they assign. To link the curriculum and academic goals more closely with student life outside the classroom, faculty can structure assignments that require students to illustrate how they are using class material in other areas of their lives, use active learning and other effective pedagogical strategies, hold students to high expectations, and indicate clearly what they must do to succeed academically.

What Can Students Do? Students take responsibility for their own learning when they participate in out-of-class activities and events that enrich the educational experience (e.g., orientation, guest lectures, internships), develop a portfolio of out-of-class learning experiences and associated benefits, and discuss with others their academic progress and how what they are learning in classes applies to other aspects of their life.

How Can Artificial Boundaries Between Classrooms and Out-Of-Class Experiences Be Transcended?

The conditions that foster student learning outside the classroom cannot be created by any one individual. However, an institution can increase the likelihood that students will experience college as a seamless web of learning across classroom and out-of-class settings by linking programs and activities across the academic and out-of-class dimensions of students' lives and removing obstacles to students' pursuit of their academic and personal goals. For this to occur, faculty, administrators, and others must challenge students and each other to view learning as continuous and contagious—in the biology lab, library, academic advisors' office, residence hall lounge, place of employment, student union, community service, and playing fields.

Selected References

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